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ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that many adults choose not to participate in available literacy programs because they equate literacy education with school. Two new directions in adult literacy program development are being explored in an effort to make programs more appealing to nonparticipants. The first is connected to program content and the second centers around greater consideration of the differences among individual students. Literacy educators are shifting their focus from discrete reading/writing skills to the expressed needs of the broad spectrum of current and potential adult learners. They are developing programs emphasizing literacy for access and orientation and literacy as voice, a vehicle for independent action, and a bridge to the future. Increasing numbers of adult literacy educators advocate understanding learners both as individuals and as members of their cultural groups/communities. The following strategies have been recommended as ways of making literacy programs that are more appealing to adults, especially nonparticipants in literacy programs: (1) involve adults in program planning and implementation; (2) develop an understanding of learners' experiences and communities; (3) hire program staff who share the culture and life experiences of the program's learners; and (4) be clear about philosophy and purpose. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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Adult Literacy Education: Emerging Directions in Program Development ERIC Digest No. 179

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by Susan Imel

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Adult Literacy Education: Emerging Directions in Program Development

The one-size-fits-all programming for [adult literacy students] that has predominated in the past should not and indeed cannot continue in the future if practitioners are to be responsive to learners' needs. Rather, practitioners must meaningfully assist adults in learning to read not only the word but their world. (Sissel 1996, p. 97).

"Why don't more adults take advantage of available opportunities to improve their basic skills?" is one of the more perplexing questions confronting the field of adult basic and literacy education. Only 8 percent of eligible adults participate in funded literacy programs and, of those who do, most (74 percent) leave during the first year (Quigley 1997). "What other area of education could live with such figures?" asks Quigley (ibid., p. 8).

A large number of adults with low literacy simply choose not to participate in available programs, and they are sometimes referred to as nonparticipants or resisters. The reasons these adults do not see literacy education as a viable alternative are complex but recent research has focused on the connection to previous school experiences (Velazquez 1996). Many adults equate literacy education with school, and, even though they have positive attitudes about learning and education, they choose not to participate in adult basic and literacy education programs (Quigley 1997; Velazquez 1996; Ziegahn 1992).

Since most adult literacy education programs still resemble school (Quigley 1997; Velazquez 1996), adult literacy educators must begin to change how programs are structured and delivered if they are going to attract nonparticipants. Fortunately, a growing number of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in the field of adult literacy education are dissatisfied with the status quo and are proposing changes based on research and practice. This Digest presents emerging perspectives about adult literacy program development. First, it reviews current ideas about the relationship between learners and program development and then presents recommendations for program development based on the literature.

Program Development: Listening to Learners' Voices

How can literacy programs become less like school and more appealing to adults, especially to nonparticipants? Two areas that hold potential for answering this question are discussed here. The first is connected to program content and the second revolves around greater consideration of the differences among students.

Beyond Reading and Writing

Literacy education must be conceptualized as more than reading and writing (Auerbach et al. 1996). According to Fingeret (1992), "our understanding of literacy has changed from [a] focus on individual skills, separated from meaningful content . . . to see[ing] that literacy is connected to the social, historical, political, cultural, and personal situations in which people use their skills" (p. 3). It is true that the desire to read and write motivates many adults to enroll in literacy education, but Ziegahn (1992) found that the nonparticipants in adult literacy strongly associated reading and writing (literacy) with schooling. Furthermore, they saw their own learning as separate from reading and writing.

Many adult literacy students understand that literacy is more than development of individual skills. When more than 1,500 adult literacy students responded to a question about the kind of skills and knowledge they need, their responses were categorized into the following purposes:

- **Literacy for access and orientation**—to have access to information and orient themselves in the world.
- **Literacy as voice**—to give voice to their ideas and opinions and to have the confidence that their voice will be heard and taken into account.
- **Literacy as a vehicle for independent action**—to solve problems and make decisions on their own, acting independently as a parent, citizen and worker, for the good of their families, their communities, and their nation.
- **Literacy as bridge to the future**—to be able to keep on learning in order to keep up with a rapidly changing world. (Stein 1995, pp. 4, 10)

In reflecting on the responses from adult learners, Stein suggests that their words "have the power to radically change the approach to adult literacy instruction" . . . because adults see reading and writing not as goals in and of themselves, but "as a necessary starting point for engagement in the world" (p. 24).

When literacy educators base their programs on the assumption that literacy is only about developing discrete skills such as reading and writing, they are delivering a message that equates literacy with schooling (Ziegahn 1992). They are also presenting literacy education as having very narrow goals and purposes that are inappropriate for the expressed needs of the broad spectrum of current and potential adult learners.

The Realities of Learners' Lives

Closely related to the recognition that literacy is more than the development of discrete skills is the growing recognition that programs must be structured in ways that address the diverse groups of learners and that reflect the contexts in which people use their skills (Fingeret 1992). Within literacy education, a great deal of attention has been focused on individualizing instruction to meet individual needs. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this notion, preoccupation with serving individuals can suppress issues of gender, race, and class, issues that reproduce the realities of the lives of many adult literacy students (Campbell 1992). Many nonparticipants associate literacy educators' lack of attention to the broader contexts in which they live their lives with schooling. To them, school is simply a place that transmits the values of the mainstream society and they find it irrelevant.

How such issues intersect with and affect literacy education is a complex subject. Among other things, it affects how literacy educators view adults with low literacy skills. For example, are they seen as victims who have exercised little control over the circumstances of their lives or as individuals whose low literacy is just one of the negative outcomes of their gender, race, class, and

culture (ibid.)? It also affects decisions about program development and implementation. Programs that are structured around these realities are much different from those which are not.

A growing number of adult literacy educators are advocating for understanding learners both as individuals and as members of their cultural groups or communities (Sissel 1996). Even in groups of learners that share a common characteristic such as sex, educators must be aware that "differences of race, culture, and class may contribute to differences in . . . goals" (Cuban and Hayes 1996, p. 10). Literacy programs that attract and retain learners are sensitive to the individual and cultural/community differences in learners' lives and address them in the planning and implementation stages of program development.

Recommendations for Program Development

Adult literacy education is a complex undertaking. The ways adults think about their learning as well as their perceptions of the skills and knowledge they need are intertwined with their lives both as individuals and as members of communities and cultural groups. Since most nonparticipants "have never stopped valuing an education" (Quigley 1997, p. 198), adult literacy educators must become more sensitive to what they want. Some recommendations for how this can be accomplished include the following:

- **Involve adults in program planning and implementation.** The need to consult adults is a theme that is woven throughout the literature (e.g., Auerbach et al. 1996; Fingeret 1992; Sissel 1996; Velasquez 1996). Adult literacy educators frequently give lip service to the importance of learner involvement, but they do not always follow through. In the instance of nonparticipants, their actions speak louder than their words. They must listen to what these adults say about their previous educational experiences and their current learning goals and use this information in program development.
- **Develop an understanding of learners' experiences and communities.** Because work with adult learners begins by respecting their culture, their knowledge, and their experiences (Auerbach et al. 1996), adult literacy educators must seek to understand learners' individual and community contexts. Talking to current and potential adult learners and other members of the community can provide helpful insights. However, literacy educators must not depend just on community members but also seek to educate themselves through films, fiction, autobiography, and poetry (Hayes 1994). Only by understanding the experiences and communities of the adults they wish to serve can adult literacy educators develop viable programs.
- **Hire program staff who share the culture and life experiences of the learners.** Ideally, these staff should be teachers. In the event that hiring teachers who reflect the learners' community is not feasible, then other program staff should be recruited from the community. All staff should receive training that familiarizes them with the social and cultural contexts of the learners (Auerbach et al. 1996; Peterson 1996; Velazquez 1996).
- **Be clear about philosophy and purpose.** Quigley (1997) suggests that programs not try to be "all things to all people." Teachers and staff need to be clear about their working philosophy and purpose and share them with potential students. Students with dissimilar goals can be referred to other programs. Programs may also be able to match students with teachers who share similar goals. For example, some teachers are philosophically oriented toward preparing students for work, and they can be matched with those students whose goal is to get a job. Quigley (ibid.) describes one small (three teachers) program that tried the "matching" approach, and, as a result, experienced a 36 percent increase in its retention rate over the previous 3 years.

If adult literacy educators are to be successful in attracting and retaining more adults in their programs, they must change how they think about their programs (Quigley 1997). The schooling model that predominates must be exchanged for one that is based on adults' perceptions of their goals and purposes and that addresses the realities of their lives.

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